

# Ignacio Zuloaga

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Zuloaga, Ignacio

The painter Ignacio Zuloaga ([Eibar](#) 1870 – [Madrid](#) 1945) gained international fame for his monumental, typical Spanish scenes. Although he was born in the Basque Country to a family of well-known artisans, he preferred to paint [Andalusian and Castilian topics](#), while during his frequent stays in Montmartre he also made a large number of society portraits. During the early 1890s, when he studied art in [Paris](#), he was overwhelmed by the number of painterly options available after impressionism had broken the spell of [academic art](#). While his friends Paul [Gauguin](#) and Émile [Bernard](#) left the French capital in order to search for true primitivism in Egypt and Tahiti, Zuloaga decided to head for [Seville](#) to immerse himself in the authentic atmosphere of a lower-class neighborhood. In 1895 he rented a room in a traditional tenement house and began to paint gypsies, dancers, [bullfighters](#) and other Andalusian characters. In order to get acquainted with local [folk culture](#), he even took classes at a [bullfighting](#) school. In 1898, he moved to [Segovia](#) and his interest shifted to the Castilian countryside. Later he would admit that by depicting life-size traditional figures in front of a characteristic local landscape (in paintings such as *On the Eve of the Bullfight*, 1898; *Gregorio in Sepúlveda*, 1908; and *The Christ of Blood*, 1911) he hoped to provide a synthesis of the “Spanish soul”.

Zuloaga’s Spanish stance was not only a matter of his thematic choices, but also of his self-affiliation to a national artistic tradition. He was particularly interested in, and propagated the fame of, the work and technique of El Greco, Velázquez and Goya. He enthusiastically showed his collection of Grecos to visitors of his Parisian studio, such as Auguste Rodin, Pablo Picasso and Rainer Maria Rilke, while in 1913 he took the initiative to transform Goya’s birth-house in Aragon into a museum.

Although his typical Spanish scenes, painted in a modern decorative style, brought him international success from ca. 1900, most Spanish critics took exception to his “ferocious caricatures”, while others preferred the more cheerful images of his Valencian rival Joaquín [Sorolla](#). Nonetheless, his work was defended by authors of the so-called [Generation of 1898](#) ([Unamuno](#), [Maeztu](#), [Azorín](#)), who argued that his depictions of rural Castile captured the most fundamental characteristics of the Spanish “spirit” and that his depictions of the countryside should not merely be

interpreted as a glorification of valuable national traditions still subsisting in the remoter parts of the country, but also as a plea for socio-economic reforms.

Zuloaga's evident Spanish nationalism allowed him to celebrate the regional variety of Spain's vernacular culture. Unlike many of his nationalist friends (Maurice [Barrès](#), Gabriele [d'Annunzio](#) and Maeztu) who figure in the run-up of what would later emerge as fascism, he never expressed himself in xenophobic or anti-Semitic terms. However, after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War (July 1936) Zuloaga openly voiced his fear of a Communist take-over of Spain and sided with Franco, to the point of supporting the new regime's international propaganda efforts. As a response to Picasso's *Guernica*, Zuloaga presented his *Siege of the Alcázar*, an indictment of Republican war crimes, at the [Venice Biennale](#) in 1937, where it received the Gran Premio Mussolini.

Paradoxically, while Zuloaga had been totally ignored by the conservative art establishment in Spain during his early innovative period, towards the end of his life he became the artistic hero of a reactionary regime. Nine years after his death his portrait even appeared on the new [500-peseta banknotes](#). At the same time he dropped out of the canon of modern art, which had changed fundamentally since the start of his career. A formal approach to art had made moral and political ideas largely redundant, while his type of organic nationalism became associated with the taint of fascism, exacerbated by his support of the Francoist camp during the Civil War. Nowadays, he is seen as a talented and interesting painter who failed to catch the progressive tide of the avant-garde.

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